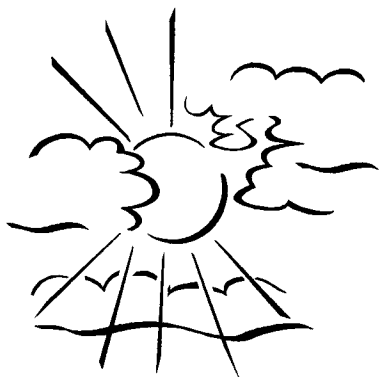


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*Important story at this spot

Articles in Today's Clips

Wednesday, February 1, 2006

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Lansing State Journal

February 1, 2006

Hollands may lose custody of kids

A decision could be made as early as today about whether the state can take full custody of Tim and Lisa Holland's four children.

The Hollands are being held on obstruction of justice charges in connection with the death of their 7-year-old adopted son, Ricky, whose remains were found Friday. A hearing on Tuesday was adjourned to today after a lawyer for Lisa Holland cited concerns about his client appearing in a jail-issued jumpsuit for the civil proceeding.

"She has the right to appear in appropriate attire in this court," said attorney Michael Nichols.

On Monday, temporary custody of the children, ranging in age from 1 to 4, was given to the state Department of Human Services, said Sam Reedy, Tim Holland's court-appointed attorney in this matter. The children are staying with relatives, but could be moved if the Hollands' parental rights are terminated.

Police have suspect, more questions in baby death

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

THE MUSKEGON CHRONICLE
FROM LOCAL AND WIRE REPORTS

SHELBY -- A grandfather who is a convicted child molester remains the focus in the death of his 5-month-old grandson, but authorities are still looking for evidence that will link him to the case.

In fact, the county prosecutor is planning to ask for a review of the autopsy results so he can be sure the death of Sebastian James Gonzalez was a homicide and establish a timeline to help in the search for suspects.

Police say the baby died of septicemia, a massive infection that resulted from "penetrating blunt trauma" to the infant's rectal area.

The 46-year-old grandfather was staying in an apartment in downtown Shelby with his two young grandsons, including the victim, and was allowed by the parents to share a bedroom with the boys, according to records in Oceana County Circuit Court. The Chronicle is not printing his name because he has not been charged with a crime.

Prosecutor Terry Shaw said he plans to meet with investigators this week to discuss the case.

This morning, he stopped short of saying there was a main suspect in the case.

"I think it's premature to say that any certain person is a suspect," Shaw said. "Obviously there is a person of interest, and everybody's figured out who that is.

"But there's a tremendous amount of legwork being done right now."

Among the "legwork" is Shaw's request for another medical examiner to review the autopsy results of a Muskegon pathologist. Shaw said he has no reason to doubt the "homicide" finding but -- given a lack of other direct evidence in the case, at least so far -- wants it confirmed by a forensic pathologist.

"The (homicide) findings are based exclusively on a medical diagnosis. We want to confirm that," Shaw said. "Obviously this will be a high-profile case with a lot of scrutiny, so we want to make sure everything is correct.

"And additionally, what is very critical here, assuming the original autopsy report is accurate, then what is the time frame between the baby's death and when he got the wounds that would have caused the bacteria (that led to the death)? The time frame is obviously critical, because that would put a window of who had access to the baby," Shaw said.

Shaw also said investigators are awaiting crime lab test results to determine whether DNA or other physical evidence is available.

Shelby Police Chief Bob Wilson said the grandfather is the only suspect. Detectives, he said, have ruled out all others and are building a case.

But the man professed his innocence Monday in the Dec. 12 death of his grandson, who police said died from an infection caused by sexual assault. "I didn't do this. I don't know where they are coming up with this."

His wife of six months defended her husband. She said she stayed in the same room and her husband was not alone with the baby. "We were never in separate rooms," she said.

Police acknowledge the grandfather has repeatedly denied any assault.

About a week after the death, Shaw filed a petition on behalf of the state Department of Human Services to take Sebastian's 22-month-old brother, Jacob, from his parents, according to court records.

In that petition, the prosecutor alleged that the boys' parents, Jaime Gonzalez and Samantha Trout, allowed the grandfather to "share a bedroom with the children of the family."

They "were both aware of (the grandfather's) sexually abusive behavior with children at the time that he shared their house" ... and they "allowed him to provide direct, unsupervised care for the children," Shaw said in the petition.

The grandfather said he has cooperated fully with police and taken four polygraph tests. He believes police are trying to get him to confess and claims he is a scapegoat.

Wilson this morning disputed the grandfather's account. He said the man has taken only two polygraph tests, and the second was requested because he "didn't cooperate" during the first test. "He just basically blew it intentionally, not answering questions," the police chief said.

The grandfather's wife said her husband never watched Sebastian and his brother, Jacob, by himself. The couple were in Shelby in early December for a family member's funeral. "I was the one who had the care of the baby," she said.

She said other people watched the two children in December and suggested police should look at them.

In the petition, Shaw, the prosecutor, also alleged the parents did not seek care for Sebastian after the infection that led to his death.

The parents are not facing charges and were cleared in the death, police said. The petition led to the temporary removal of Jacob from the parents' home, court records show. The boy is staying with his maternal grandmother in the Shelby area, and his parents are allowed supervised visits, according to records.

In an earlier interview, the parents refused to discuss the alleged suspect, other than to say he was an acquaintance who cared for their sons on two occasions. The couple could not be reached for comment.

The grandfather was charged in early 1996 with two counts of first-degree sexual assault of a girl under age 13 who was known to him, court records show. He pleaded guilty to second-degree sexual assault with a child under 13 -- a felony.

He was sentenced to 2 to 15 years in prison. He was discharged from parole in 2003, prison records show.

Uncle charged in boy's beating

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

By Scott Hagen
shagen@citpat.com -- 768-4929

A police picture of the 8-year-old boy shows his blue eyes underlined by two black marks and his head distorted from swelling and bruises.

"He told police that his uncle beat him," Chief Assistant Prosecutor Mark Blumer said. "And that it wasn't the first time."

Nathan Howard, the boy's 27-year-old uncle, was arraigned Tuesday in Jackson County District Court on one count of second-degree child abuse and one count of domestic assault for allegedly inflicting the bruises.

Howard and his wife, 23-year-old Autumn Nickerson, were awarded custody of the boy about a week ago.

The boy was called to the office Monday morning at Arnold Elementary School in the Michigan Center School District because of the bruising.

A sheriff's deputy talked to the boy and his aunt, and later arrested Howard at his home on Nash Drive in Leoni Township.

The boy also told police that Howard would make him do calisthenics, sometimes with weights, as punishment and that the bruises came from Howard hitting him so hard that he doubled-over and smacked his face on his own knees, Blumer said.

"We've heard reports that teachers at the school love him," Blumer said.

During his arraignment in District Judge Darryl Mazur's court, Howard said he was "not violent. I'm not a violent person."

Blumer asked the court, based on the "great cruelty and great violence to this child," to set a \$50,000 bond. Instead, Mazur set a bond of \$5,000 and ordered Howard to have no contact with the boy if released from jail.

The boy, as well as the couple's 8-month-old daughter and 4-year-old daughter, were placed in foster care following Howard's arrest.

Blumer said Nickerson, who declined to comment, denied the allegations. A woman identified as Howard's mother said "You don't know this child."

Howard will appear in Mazur's court Feb. 9 for a preliminary examination.

Sturgis man charged in kidnapping of boy, 10

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette

CENTREVILLE -- A 21-year-old Sturgis man was charged Tuesday with numerous offenses, including kidnapping and criminal sexual conduct, stemming from a case involving a 10-year-old boy last summer.

St. Joseph County Prosecutor Doug Fisher announced during a Tuesday afternoon news conference that Sean Lee Lucas was arrested Monday by Sturgis police. Lucas was arraigned in 3rd District Court, and bond was set at \$1 million. Lucas has not posted bond, and he is in St. Joseph County Jail. A preliminary examination has been tentatively scheduled for Feb. 9. Lucas was charged with kidnapping-child enticement, first-degree criminal sexual conduct, second-degree criminal sexual conduct, home invasion and assault with a dangerous weapon, Fisher said.

He was arrested at the Sturgis Police Department, where he had been summoned to answer questions about the July 16 incident, Fisher said. Lucas had been one of a handful of suspects in the case, and through process of elimination and based on the results of Monday's police interview, was pinpointed as the chief suspect, Fisher said.

Fisher said Lucas allegedly entered a basement window of a unit in the Village Manor Apartments on the east side of Sturgis, abducted the boy from a bedroom and assaulted him at a nearby vacant apartment unit. The boy was released after the alleged assault.

The boy, who is not from Sturgis, was in the care of his father when the incident occurred, investigators said. Also present in the apartment at the time of the abduction were the father's girlfriend and her daughter, officials said.

Fisher would not reveal whether it is believed the victim was chosen randomly.

Fisher said two breaks were critical in the police determination of Lucas as the suspect. One was based on undisclosed evidence discovered by Sturgis Police Detective Sgt. Richard Johnson, the other from Sturgis Police Sgt. Geoffrey Smith, Fisher said.

He said Smith noted the similarities between Lucas and a police composite sketch, created from information supplied by a number of eyewitnesses who noticed suspicious activity in the area before the incident.

Fisher said Smith knew Lucas previously from casual contact and not in a police-criminal capacity. Fisher said that police in a relatively small community such as Sturgis have an advantage of knowing many of the community's residents.

The composite, in fact, was based on descriptions given by a number of people living near the unit where the victim was abducted; the victim was unable to provide police a clear facial description, Fisher said.

Fisher said more than 140 tips were phoned in to authorities after the composite sketch was released to the media.

Sturgis Police Chief David Northrup said the willingness of witnesses to come forward was critical.

"This is an example of people being aware of their surroundings," Northrup said.

Fisher said Lucas is not a suspect in the Brittany Beers abduction, even though she was taken from an apartment in the same complex in September 1997. Sturgis police consider that case open and active. More than 900 tips have been offered to police in the Beers abduction.

City Was Told 6 Times of Trouble in Bronx Boy's Home

By AL BAKER and LESLIE KAUFMAN
The New York Times

Published: February 1, 2006

Even though the city's child welfare agency had received six complaints about the family of Quachaun Browne since 2004 — and even though caseworkers had been inside his home four times since November — it failed to act before a weekend-long torrent of abuse and neglect that ended with the 4-year-old's death late Sunday, the authorities said yesterday.

In all the encounters, including the most recent visit, on Jan. 12, caseworkers did not detect a dangerous new presence in the family's Kossuth Avenue apartment in the Norwood section of the Bronx: Jose Calderon, the boyfriend of the boy's mother, who was charged yesterday with second-degree murder in his death, officials said.

The police said Mr. Calderon, 18, told detectives that he lost his temper and hit Quachaun, whom he blamed for toppling a television Friday afternoon, and that the boy's mother, Aleshia Smith, 26, did nothing to intervene until it was too late. She was charged with second-degree manslaughter.

The Administration for Children's Services — still reeling from the death last month of 7-year-old Nixzmary Brown in Brooklyn — outlined its encounters with Quachaun's family in a squalid apartment where the police said cold air streamed in through a broken window, most of the children slept in a single room and there was little food in the refrigerator.

"After reviewing the history in this case, the obvious evidence of chronic neglect should have prompted a stronger response rather than addressing and resolving each incident separately," said John B. Mattingly, the child welfare agency's commissioner. "However, nothing in the record suggests A.C.S. failed to act in a way that might have prevented this fatality."

The police described a chilling weekend of victimization for the boy that began when the television fell. Based on physical evidence, as well as the statements of Mr. Calderon, Ms. Smith and some of her children, the police said Mr. Calderon beat Quachaun off and on through Saturday, went with the family to a nearby Chuck E. Cheese's restaurant where the boy vomited blood, and then beat him at home again that night.

At times, the police said, Mr. Calderon grabbed the boy's neck, pushed his face into the wall and grabbed him by the ankles, swung him and hurled him into the wall. A law enforcement official said Mr. Calderon had beaten the boy with his fists, a belt and a plastic bat. Quachaun suffered a fractured skull and a lacerated spleen and pancreas.

The police believe he died late Sunday night. His mother woke early Monday morning to find Mr. Calderon trying to revive him, and then argued with him about calling for help. She got hold of his cellphone, about 3:30 a.m., and dialed 911.

Quachaun was declared dead about 45 minutes after the police and paramedics responded to the call and found the boy with a body temperature of 83 degrees, indicating that he had been dead for hours, the official said.

Yesterday, while the city medical examiner's office said it had not yet determined the official cause of death, because of the need for further tissue testing, Quachaun's mother and her companion were led in handcuffs from the Police Department's 52nd Precinct station house to face arraignment.

Mr. Calderon held his chin up, pursed his lips and defiantly scanned a crowd of reporters yelling questions at him as he walked from the old red-brick station house. Ms. Smith, who emerged moments later, kept her head mostly up but her eyes cast down, expressionless, as she walked from the building.

After a 24-hour investigation that included intense questioning of Mr. Calderon and Ms. Smith, the police said that two of Quachaun's five sisters, a 6-year-old and a 9-year-old, indicated that they saw Mr. Calderon deliver the blows to their brother's tiny body that the police believe led to his death.

During a court appearance last night, a prosecutor described some elements of Mr. Calderon's version of events that he told detectives. Mr. Calderon said that he thought Quachaun had damaged his stereo on Friday night, and admitted that he had hit the boy four times with a red belt, according to the prosecutor.

Mr. Calderon said he told Quachaun to go to his room. But, he said, Quachaun refused, cursing at him, which sent Mr. Calderon into a rage; he said he hit the boy seven times with his open hand, according to the prosecutors.

Two nights later, Mr. Calderon said in his statement, Quachaun soiled himself in bed and had blood in his stool. He said he took the boy to the bathroom to rouse him. When Mr. Calderon left the bathroom, Quachaun fell and hit his head on the floor, causing his ears to bleed, Mr. Calderon said.

Mr. Calderon was remanded and ordered to appear March 3.

Ms. Smith's lawyer, Lewis A. Mazzone, said her client wanted to help her son but felt threatened by her boyfriend. Bail was set at \$40,000; it was not clear if she could post it.

A child welfare official said yesterday that complaints were made about how Ms. Smith was raising her children eight times in the last 10 years, including six times since October 2004. Most of the calls, which came from family friends, a school guidance counselor and a doctor, involved neglect.

"They were consistently about inadequate guardianship, poor housekeeping and school absences," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the inquiry into Quachaun's death was continuing.

Two of the reports indicted that there might be physical abuse in the house, one reported excessive corporal punishment, and one involved Quachaun being burned, the official said. While the child welfare agency investigated them all, it was unclear how many — if any — of the cases were substantiated.

The most recent complaint was made on Nov. 15 by a counselor at Public School/Middle School 280, which two of Quachaun's older half-sisters were attending. That investigation was continuing when Quachaun died, the official said.

The two girls were said to be "frequently absent, were hungry and didn't have adequate clothing and were not well supervised."

The official added that "nothing in it alleged anything about Quachaun; there were no physical abuse allegations."

The child welfare caseworker made a first visit to the house within 24 hours of the complaint and made five more visits. Two times, the family was not home. On four occasions, the caseworker was admitted to the home, most recently on Jan 12.

"The casework was solid and up-to-date," the official said. Even so, the official acknowledged, the caseworker apparently had no knowledge about Mr. Calderon.

"There is nothing in case file about Jose Calderon," the official said. "He wasn't known to us or to the Department of Homeless Services. He was never present when we were there."

Neighbors have said Mr. Calderon moved in about eight weeks ago with all his belongings and his pit bull. The police said they believed that he had been living there since August and that he discouraged Ms. Smith from seeing her friends, hid her keys and hit her friends' children.

They say they believed that Mr. Calderon may also have hit and neglected the other children but that Quachaun was the main target of his aggression.

When Quachaun was found, he was lying on a mattress in a makeshift bedroom in the apartment's living room, bleeding from the ears and rectum, the police said. The television was lying on the floor.

Mr. Calderon was arrested on Jan. 19, when the police said he was stopped driving a stolen vehicle in the Bronx.

February 01, 2006

The Detroit News

Release criminal records of school workers

School staffers in Michigan have been convicted of 4,600 offenses

The criminal records of school employees in Michigan should be released to the public, not kept secret in a flurry of legal maneuvers.

Parents have the right to know if their child is being exposed at school to a sex offender or violent ex-convict.

But Ingham County Judge Joyce Draganchuk, acting on a motion from the Michigan Education Association, has ordered that such information be kept secret, at least for now.

The Detroit News had requested details of the criminal records of school employees from the state under Michigan's Freedom of Information Act.

The teachers union objected, saying that inaccuracies in state records may expose some innocent staffers to persecution.

But there's no way of knowing whether the records are inaccurate as long as they're kept secret.

The MEA's position doesn't hold water. If its motion is upheld, any government records could be kept from public view because they may contain an error.

Draganchuk ruled the state can release neither the names of school employees who have criminal histories nor the districts where they work. A hearing on the matter is set for Feb. 10.

Draganchuk should lift her ban in favor of parents, students and a free flow of public information.

There's plenty to know. Many Michigan school employees have prison records, according to state data published in The News. Altogether, such workers have been convicted of 4,600 offenses including 2,200 felonies. Homicide, sex crimes and drug felonies are on the list of offenses.

Having a criminal record does not automatically preclude someone from working for a school district. But the tally of offenses does include 100 sex crimes, which are immediate grounds for dismissal under a state law that went into effect Jan. 1.

Recent background checks of school employees turned up 23 convicted of homicide, 11 of child abuse, 10 of escaping jail or prison, 355 of drug felonies and 21 of armed robbery.

Where those ex-convicts work, and what level of exposure they have to children, is information parents need to determine whether their children are safe at school.

Past offenses bear down on area school employees

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION
Wednesday, February 01, 2006

By Ron Fonger
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GENESEE COUNTY - Some teachers, bus drivers or school aides will need written permission from their superintendent and school board just to keep their jobs after this week.

And those are the lucky ones.

A list of school employees with criminal convictions is on its way to school districts across the state this week in the first blanket background check under a new state law that requires any employee convicted of a sex offense to be fired immediately.

Workers with other felony convictions and select misdemeanors will need written approval from the superintendent and school board to stay on the job - even if the conviction came decades ago.

About 2,500 school employees - including some convicted of sexual assault and homicide - are on the list, according to background checks by state police.

The criminal background checks involved 200,000 current school employees in Michigan and revealed more than 4,600 criminal offenses, of which 2,200 were felonies.

The Flint Journal has requested the information for local school districts from the state Department of Education through the Freedom of Information Act. The department would not release the information last week.

Designed to protect children from predators, the checks also will leave school officials with some heart-wrenching decisions about whether to keep an otherwise model employee convicted of a non-sexually related crime.

"There are going to be teachers that might have done some things when they were younger that may show up," said Steve Burroughs, president of the United Teachers of Flint. "Those are the ones that are going to hurt. (It could be someone who is) just an outstanding teacher."

Burroughs and Tom Svtkovich, superintendent of the Genesee Intermediate School District, said they want sex offenders off the job.

But those employees will amount to less than 5 percent of the felonies that will be reported back to school systems.

QUICK TAKE

School employees under scrutiny Criminal background checks have shown current Michigan school employees have committed about 2,200 felonies.

The state Department of Education last week matched the names of convicted employees with the districts in which they work. The matching names are expected to sent to school districts this week.

Under a law that took effect Jan. 1, any employee convicted of a sex offense must be fired. Workers with any other felony convictions and some misdemeanors must receive written approval from the superintendent and school board to keep their jobs.

Other misdemeanors that require written permission to keep a school job include delivery or distribution of a controlled substance to a minor or within 1,000 feet of a school, third- or fourth-degree child abuse and breaking and entering or entering certain buildings without permission.

"Anybody that has a serious conviction that violates the law should not be in a public school. The issue will come ... in the gray areas," Svtkovich said. "You look down your block, and many of your neighbors could have some of those same (convictions)."

An Ingham County judge has ruled that the state cannot release the names of school employees who have criminal histories and where they work.

Before the new Pupil Protection Laws, background checks were required only for new teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, school psychologists and bus drivers.

The same law requires that schools re-fingerprint all employees by July 1, 2008, and bars sex offenders from living within a school safety zone.

Kay Selley of Swartz Creek, the mother of a high school senior and freshman, said she has mixed feelings about what her district should do if officials find some employees were convicted of a serious crime, especially if it happened many years ago.

"I don't think people should have to suffer forever" for committing a crime, said Selley.

She said she favors taking employees convicted of a sex offense out of schools.

Linden School Superintendent Elizabeth Leonard said she will talk to any employee caught up in the background check and talk to lawyers for the district before she takes any action.

"This is someone's livelihood. You have to take that into consideration," said Leonard. "It's got to be case by case. You can't have 'one size fits all.'"

Such issues as tenure and other employment rights mean school systems will "be spending an awful lot of money talking to school attorneys," said Svtkovich, who supports the new law.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, director of communications for the Michigan

Education Association, said she

expects some problems with the criminal background list headed to school districts, including cases of mistaken identity.

"Even the state police agree there are some victims of identity theft that will be caught in this," Trimer-Hartley said. "We know there are problems."

Information from The Associated Press is included in this report.

Part D improving, slowly

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

SCOTT DAVIS
THE SAGINAW NEWS

A month after its launch, pharmacists say new Medicare drug coverage remains a tangle of bureaucracy and voice-mail headaches.

Mid-Michigan pharmacists say the transition has improved since the effort's first week, beginning Jan. 1 -- when pharmacists worked hours of overtime -- but bewilderment remains the rule of the day.

"The program is up and running, but the confusion is still there (among seniors)," said Raymond W. Boettcher, chief pharmacist for Bridgeport Pharmacy, 6224 Dixie. "Some of the companies participating are still behind in getting the cards to patients."

Seniors and those with disabilities now can receive prescription drug coverage under Medicare Part D after signing up for one of many government-approved drug plans offered by private companies. The effort is designed to subsidize drug costs for these Americans, costing an estimated \$724 billion over the next decade.

"It's a step in the right direction, but typical of bureaucracy, the more hands in the pot, the more complicated it gets," Boettcher said.

The biggest problem, some pharmacists say, remains verifying seniors' coverage with their insurance company. They say many still don't have their new Medicare insurance cards when they walk in to fill a prescription.

Often, pharmacists are left hanging on the phone for 45 minutes or more just to get through to an insurance representative.

"The insurance companies are overwhelmed," said Kevin E. Wenzel, chief pharmacist at Faler Drug, 1806 Court in Saginaw. "They are overwhelmed with phone calls, and they say, 'Please call back.' "

Officials at some insurance companies have added staff to deal with the deluge of calls, and pharmacists say the problem has eased.

Moreover, Medicare officials say, they have expanded help-line staff, and seniors apparently now get through more easily.

"(The new drug plan) has done much better now," said Laurie A. Snellenberger, pharmacy manager for Healthway Compounding Pharmacy, 1008 N. Saginaw in St. Charles. "Now it's more of an education process (for seniors)."

In Michigan, seniors have more than three dozen plans from which to choose and have until Monday, May 15, to sign up.

By then, pharmacists say they hope insurers will have smoothed most of the bumps in the coverage.

Scott Davis is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9665.

Granholm's new long-term care rules are gift to union

Web-posted Feb 1, 2006

EDITORIAL

Let's call this what it is: A labor union getting a huge and cynical-seeming favor from a governor who's rightly worried about winning re-election.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm has short-circuited her own Long-Term Care Task Force in an abrupt attempt to make it virtually mandatory for group homes and assisted living centers to be organized by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, better known as AFSCME.

Union representation is presented as the easiest way to meet proposed new standards.

Her administration is pushing through a set of operating rules that organized labor helped draft.

The new internal paperwork required and employee time spent in mandatory meetings would cost an estimated \$35 million a year, the care industry in Michigan claims. That likely would mean higher fees when most families have to struggle to afford such care now.

The stated aim of this virtual state-sponsored labor-organizing effort is to ensure that the employees at such facilities are better trained and compensated, which presumably would attract a more reliable work force and reduce turnover.

Those now in the business of providing such care also complain that the new rules are being rushed into place with too little consultation.

A procedural change engineered by former Gov. John Engler is coming back to haunt foes of the new rules. For his convenience and that of his successors, he took the lawmakers largely out of the approval or denial process. So basically what Granholm and AFSCME want, they can get.

That is unless citizen protests were to lead the governor to conclude the ploy might do her more harm than good at the polls.

One organization shut out of the long-term study process by this sudden rush to organize is

AARP in Michigan. It's an organization big enough to get any politician's attention if it wants to.

Perhaps the most shameful aspect of this seemingly panicked maneuver by the governor is that it so disappoints and disillusiones the many well-meaning participants in her original task force.

Among its goals was to make it possible for more of those now in assisted living centers to return to their own homes, an effort applauded in this space.

Now that's been kicked down the road for who knows how long in order to do an apparent election-eve favor for a powerful labor union.

Let debate begin on campaign fund bill

The argument was made here recently that a citizen in court should not have to face a judge who may have been the beneficiary of campaign contributions from the opposing litigant, as in a contested divorce. Nor should the outcome of a state Supreme Court race depend on which group of special-interest attorneys contributed the most money to the candidates.

Now state Sen. Deborah Cherry, a Democrat from Burton, has introduced a bill that would require public funding at least of Supreme Court candidates. In Oakland County, she represents Groveland, Brandon, Springfield and Waterford townships.

She'd have the money come from voluntary taxpayer contributions via their income tax returns.

Her proposal is a good start in the right direction, but should include appeals and circuit court judges, too. Let the debate begin.

THE OAKLAND PRESS

THE ISSUES: How it plays in Michigan

Health-care costs, alternative fuels of interest to the state

The Detroit Free Press

February 1, 2006

Michiganders could be affected by at least three proposals that President George W. Bush discussed Tuesday night:

Health care

Bush promised to tackle soaring medical expenses but gave few details and promised no immediate relief.

The issue will be closely watched by automakers. General Motors Corp. and Ford Motor Co. say soaring health-care costs have contributed to the financial crises that are forcing them to close plants and lay off thousands of workers.

Polls of Michiganders in the past several years show health care is consistently a top issue of concern. A 2005 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation showed nearly 40% of Americans were "very worried" about paying more for medical care or health insurance. And between 2000 and 2005, health insurance premiums rose 73%; workers' income rose 15%.

In January, Gov. Jennifer Granholm said she wants to create a health insurance plan for 550,000 low-income people without medical coverage. But Republicans were divided on her proposals. Opponents said her plan to expand health care programs for the working poor was ambitious but unrealistic.

Energy and fuel

Bush pushed for a decrease in the United States' dependence on the Middle East for fuel and an increase in the use of ethanol from corn.

At the State of the State in January, Granholm bragged about Michigan's ability to contribute to the country's quest for new energy resources. "This is about a Michigan whose engineers can harness the power in alternative fuels, whose doctors will develop cures for cancer, whose business people are excited this very minute about designing offices, creating jobs and selling products that we don't even have a name for," she said.

Jason Vines, vice president of Chrysler Group Communications, said Tuesday night that reducing dependence on foreign oil isn't necessarily the goal, but every automaker already is aggressively working on new technologies to meet consumer demand for more fuel-efficient vehicles. "We're all trying," Vines said Tuesday night. "We want people to use less gas. We have engineers working every day in our labs trying to suck more out of every gallon of gas."

GM and DaimlerChrysler AG agreed in August to jointly develop gasoline-electric hybrid systems, which provide better fuel economy than traditional vehicles. The 2007 GMC Yukon and Chevrolet Tahoe are to be the first vehicles to use the hybrid system. A few months later, Chrysler Group is to offer a new hybrid system in its Dodge Durango SUV.

For a list of ethanol-compatible vehicles, visit www.e85fuel.com/e85101/flexfuelvehicles.php.

The Patriot Act

Bush asked Congress to reauthorize the soon-to-expire Patriot Act, which opened more personal records to government scrutiny.

His proposal is sure to be controversial with civil libertarians and many Arab Americans and Muslims in metro Detroit, who often feel unfairly targeted by federal agencies probing terrorism.

From Chicago Tribune and wire and staff reports

\$3M total one of the best for United Way

Wednesday, February 01, 2006

By Brian Wheele
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United Way of Jackson County recorded its second-largest tally in seven decades of annual fund raising, officials said this morning.

Community leaders applauded the \$3,023,033 raised in the 2005 campaign. They said the figure was impressive, given local economic woes and money that flowed from Jackson for Hurricane Katrina relief.

The nonprofit raised \$2,930,888 last year; this year's total was exceeded only by the \$3.1 million raised in 2001.

The United Way had set a \$3.3 million goal for this campaign, which began in September.

"In a year where a lot of United Ways were reducing goals, we wanted to stay aggressive,"

Michael McKenna, resource development director, said Tuesday.

Local groups now will apply for grants, which should be handed out by May. The money last year issued grants to 26 local nonprofits, including the Jackson Child Care Center, the Salvation Army, the AWARE shelter and Catholic Charities of Jackson.

United Way officials said they will raise more money, yet they point to a shift in how they share the community's charity. Executive Director Ken Toll said a thrust is toward using funds to spin off partnerships that address issues independently.

Missing the \$3.3 million goal, for example, means the United Way won't earmark much money for its Success by Six program to prepare children for school. Still, Toll noted that the agency collaborated with the county Intermediate School District as it recently obtained a \$150,000 grant for early-childhood education.

Published February 1, 2006

The fight over \$5.15

Some want to see Michigan's minimum wage increase, but businesses fear the pinch

Christian Czerwinski | NOISE

Just one dime.

Shannon Faust wishes she could make just one more dime an hour. In her world, one dime equals one more tank of gas a week. It means she can buy essentials like shampoo or maybe a winter hat for one of her two children.

For a 32-year-old mother who makes \$6.75 an hour working part-time and studying at Great Lakes Christian College full-time, there's always a need for something.

Come next year, she might get that extra dime as a push is under way by Democrats and other organizations to put a ballot issue before voters that would support increasing Michigan's minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$6.85. The pre-tip wage for wait staff would also rise from \$2.65 to \$4.35.

Supporters of upping the minimum wage - which hasn't seen an increase since 1997 despite growing inflation - say it will help hundreds of thousands of workers and their families. An estimated 400,000 Michigan workers now earn less than the proposed \$6.85 minimum, about 40 percent of whom are adults supporting other people.

"With gas and the cost of everything going up, it's so hard. If that 10-cent wage increase kicked in, that would be a major relief," Faust said.

Recently, the Michigan House of Representatives voted down a Senate bill to increase the state's minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.15. Gov. Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, who had supported that bill, said in her Jan. 25 State of the State address that she has signed the petition to get the minimum wage increase issue on the ballot.

Currently, 17 states exceed the U.S. standard.

"Right now, if you work a full-time job, at minimum wage, and you're a single person, you just make it above the poverty line. But if you're supporting anyone else, you'll be under," said Diedre Murch, head organizer of the Michigan Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

ACORN, a national grass-roots organization, is spearheading a charge along with organizations like the AFL-CIO, the Michigan Democratic Party and other groups to collect 317,000 valid signatures to get the proposed increase on the November ballot.

They began collecting signatures earlier this month and have until the end of July. If the proposal passes (it needs a majority vote), it would amend the state constitution and go into effect on Jan. 1, 2007. The minimum wage would continue to be adjusted every July 1 to compensate for inflation.

Opponents of the initiative, including restaurant owners and low-wage employers, say if they have to pay more, they may have to cut back on hiring, reduce staffing or raise prices for services.

Wendy Hofmeyer, director of health policy and human resources for Michigan Chamber of Commerce, called the ballot initiative "extremely political and partisan" and a tactic to increase turnout for the Democratic ticket in 2006.

However, people like Shannon Faust aren't concerned with the political aspect of it, especially when the rent is due and she doesn't have the money.

Cash goes fast

A typical day for Faust begins at 6 a.m. She gets her son, Jaden, 5, and daughter, Sekaye, 4, dressed and fed. She takes them to day care and school and gets into work about 8:30 a.m. at a local child care center. But if there are not enough kids at the center, Faust can't sign-in to work. At times, she's sat at work for two hours waiting to sign-in. After work, she volunteers to coach her son's basketball team, cooks dinner or goes to class.

"I'm frustrated on a daily basis. Low-income families have to struggle with depression and addiction or use illegal means," she said from the couch of her small two-bedroom apartment. "I choose not to go that route, but I know single mothers who do what they have to to survive."

In a normal week, Faust works between 24 to 27 hours, which means she takes in about \$350 every two weeks. Her income from work amounts to about \$9,100 annually.

Now, consider her monthly bills: \$500 for rent, utilities included; a \$250 car payment; \$175 for child care; and an unspecified amount for things like gas, clothes and other expenses that come up.

She also receives \$150 a month in child support, \$314 for her Michigan Bridge Card and loans from school. Nevertheless, she's a few months behind on her rent and owes about \$40,000 in school loans that have accumulated since she started taking classes about 13 years ago. She doesn't have a phone and doesn't do anything recreational that isn't free.

Faust lives well below the poverty line which for a three-person family is \$15,670, according to the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth. An estimated 28.2 percent of all single mothers in the state (nearly 141,000 women) live below that line.

"I'm barely making it. I'd almost break even with a 10-cent increase," she said. "Low minimum wage keeps the mentality down. I pay more in child care than I make. Why go to work? There's no incentive for a better life."

Lansing resident Stephen Button, 20, makes \$6.01 an hour working construction clean-up and takes care of his disabled mother in a small apartment. Button recently went to California to train as a traveling magazine salesman and hopes to earn a better wage.

"About 95 percent of my money goes towards taking care of my mother and it's hard," he said. "The economy stinks and you can't live off that little money. Even if you work 40 hours a week, you can't pay rent, buy food and insurance."

Getting Noticed

Former state representative John Freeman, director of Michigan Needs a Raise - the committee formed to put the initiative on the ballot, says that an increased minimum wage would boost the state's economy. He wants 400,000 signatures to show officials that supporters mean business. He said work needs to pay-off for those who leave welfare and try to make a life.

Most officials agree that it's hard to support a family on the current minimum wage, especially with Michigan's anemic economic climate.

"Inflation has eaten away at the purchasing power of \$5.15 (an hour). That isn't worth the same amount as it was in 1997. We want people to be able to make a good wage for a day's work as people are experiencing an increase in heating costs and gas," Freeman said. "People who earn more money are not going to plop it into a saving account. They're going to buy food for their children or put money down on a house. This is going right toward the economy."

Michigan Democratic party chairman Mark Brewer agreed.

"This is long overdue. We need to give folks a good start at their first job and \$5.15 is not adequate," Brewer said. "A lot of people are trying to support a family and that's just impossible."

Not an option

But opponents of the proposal say an increase would chase jobs away from the state. Hofmeyer said a wage increase would drive up the cost of entry-level jobs, would encourage employers to hire more-skilled job applicants and would generally increase the cost of doing business.

Of any business, the restaurant industry would stand to suffer more than most from the higher wage proposal.

Andy Deloney, director of public affairs for Michigan Restaurant Association, said the group has always been opposed to the increase because it would result in benefit reductions and job cuts.

Without giving a specific name, he said a restaurant owner in Lansing who owns two establishments would have to shut down one of them if the initiative passes. The increase would cost him more than \$20,000 a year and force him to lay off employees in the business that stayed open.

"We question where this money is going to come from. A lot of folks said it'll have a huge impact on the ability to operate a restaurant," Deloney said. "We have lots of other examples. A restaurant owner in Oakland County told us that an increase would cost him more than \$80,000."

Charles DeLuca, one of three owners of DeLuca's Restaurant on Lansing's north side, said he wouldn't cut servers. His only option: raise prices.

"The higher the expenses, the more you'd have to charge. There's no other way around it. You need so many people to do the job," he said.

Feeling the Stretch

But as gas prices and heating costs have risen in recent months (though not as high as thought due to a warmer-than-usual January), local residents' wallets are being stretched, forcing them to turn to outside help.

Since October, the Greater Lansing Food Bank has seen an increase in the number of people they serve, said director Sharon Krinock. In November 2004, the bank served 1,500 families; it went up by 200 - a 13 percent increase - this past November.

"About 24 percent of these people are working on a fixed income. They may also be working minimum wage jobs," she said. "Their resources are being stretched. A lot of people have to make a choice of, do they buy groceries or medicine."

Doug Stites, who is chief executive of Capital Area Michigan Works which provides training programs for job seekers and recruiting services for employers, receives about 500 calls a day from those wanting a better job.

He sees the proposed wage increase as a double-edged sword. While it would raise a worker's standard of living, it would also squeeze employers' budgets and could lead to less hiring.

"On this subject, beauty is in the eye of the beholder," he said.

Minimum wage facts

The minimum wage was 25 cents an hour when it started in the United States on Oct. 24, 1938. It has increased 25 times since then.

The federal minimum wage was \$1 an hour in 1956; it increased to \$2 in 1974 and \$3.10 in 1980. The last increase, which put it at the current \$5.15, took effect in 1998.

Seventeen states have higher minimum wages than the federal minimum. They are: Alaska, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington and Wisconsin.

Washington has the highest wage at \$7.63 an hour.

More than 30 other countries including Turkey, Japan, Poland and Mexico have a minimum wage.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Taking names

To get the minimum wage initiative on the ballot, ACORN and other state organizations need at least 317,000 signatures by the end of July.

The initiative would then go on the November 2006 ballot and need a majority vote to pass.

If voted in, it would amend the state constitution, raising the minimum wage to \$6.85 on Jan. 1, 2007. It would then be adjusted every July 1 to compensate for inflation.

For more information, visit www.acorn.org or call 664-2620.

Teenage Girl Leads Police On Wild Chase

Alleged Runaway Stole Friend's Truck

POSTED: 4:45 pm EST January 31, 2006

A 16-year-old girl from Oxford Township is facing multiple charges for leading police on a stolen-car chase, according to *The Oakland Press*.

The girl was charged as a juvenile Monday with unlawful driving away of an automobile, fleeing and eluding and leaving the scene of an accident, according to police.

The Oakland Press reported that the girl was a passenger in a truck and was being taken home by a friend when the pair stopped at the Lakeville Inn at Rochester and Lakeville roads on Jan. 28, according to *The Oakland Press*.

The girl, who has a valid driver's license, then allegedly locked the doors of the truck and drove off, hitting two cars before proceeding west on Lake George to Glaspie Road, according to the paper.

Police spotted the girl wrecklessly driving and followed her to Ray Road and onto southbound M-24, then into Lake Orion and Orion Township, police told *The Oakland Press*.

Police put stop sticks in the road near Greenshield, and authorities say the vehicle's punctured tires stopped the truck north of Silver Bell Road, according to the paper.

The girl, who police is say is a runaway, is currently being held at Children's Village.

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The Detroit News

February 1, 2006

Brighton

Sex assault suspect, 13, may waive exam today

A 13-year-old boy accused of sexually assaulting a 7-year-old girl in the bathroom of the Brighton District Library could waive his right to a preliminary exam in a conference today in Livingston County Juvenile Court. A plea agreement had been discussed, but no agreement has been reached, Prosecutor David Morse said. A trial date was set for Feb. 15 before Judge Susan Reck.

Wyoming rustles up job-seekers

600 from area seek employment

MUNDY TOWNSHIP

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Tuesday, January 31, 2006

By Matt Bach

mbach@flintjournal.com • 810.766.6330

MUNDY TWP. - Moving from Swartz Creek to Wyoming would be a dream come true for Jennifer Proffer.

Proffer said she is in constant fear that her lack of money will cause the state to take her two sons, ages 12 and 15. She makes \$6.50 an hour working part time at an area restaurant, so the idea of getting a full-time job in Wyoming that pays \$15 or more an hour is very exciting.

"I'm tired of waking up in the morning wondering if today is the day I lose my kids because I can't afford them," said Proffer, 38. "Making \$15 to \$20 an hour, plus health benefits, would triple my income. I couldn't go wrong. I like to fish, too. That's one of my dreams, to go fly fishing in Wyoming." Proffer was among hundreds from the Flint area seeking employment at a job fair conducted by 13 Wyoming officials Monday at the AmericInn Hotel. The officials - representing economic development groups, colleges and prospective employers - also will have job fairs today in Lansing and Wednesday in Jackson.

The officials expected total attendance of about 500 people at the three stops, but they estimated 600 attended just the Flint-area fair, said Ruth Benson, marketing director for the Campbell County Economic Development Corp.

More than 100 people showed up before the fair officially started at 10 a.m., said Christopher Manegold, a former Michigan resident who moved to Wyoming three years ago to head the Casper Area Economic Development Alliance Inc.

"This is phenomenal," Manegold said of the turnout. "I am surprised, but as a former Michigan resident, it's really a shame that something like this draws this kind of attention. That's the sad part about it."

"One company that was here said 25 percent of the candidates were very good, and they could've hired them today," said Benson, adding that the company left with a large stack of resumes. "We were impressed by the number of welders and mechanics - hard-working people - who could easily go from one industry (automotive) to another (natural resources)."

Still, many job-seekers left wishing the fair had more employers doing on-the-spot interviews.

QUICK TAKE

More job fairs
Officials from
Wyoming held the
first of three job
fairs Monday in
Mundy Township.

The remaining two
events are: 10 a.m.-
6 p.m. today at the
Holiday Inn South
Conference Center
in Lansing.

10 a.m.-6 p.m.
Wednesday at the
Holiday Inn in
Jackson.

Attending a job fair
isn't the only way
to get work in
Wyoming. People
also can visit the
state's Web site,
onestop.state.wy.us.

"I thought there would be more specific jobs, but they had every kind of job listed from child care to teachers to welding," said David Brazie, 23, who attended with his brother, Jeff, 20, both of Clio. "I'm not disappointed; it was just different than what I was expecting."

Officials from P&H Mine Pro Services were at the fair, but Benson said she hopes to include more Wyoming employers when the job fair returns, possibly this summer.

"We got companies turning away business because they don't have the skilled people, and that's just unacceptable when you're in the economic development business," Manegold said.

Those attending put their contact information on a sign-up sheet and were given the Web site address of available jobs in Wyoming, onestop.state.wy.us. At that site, people can register for the available jobs.

Most of the work available is tied to the state's mining and natural gas industries. The state, which has a 3.5 percent unemployment rate, provides about 35 percent of the nation's coal used for electricity, Benson said.

Many of those attending had jobs but were concerned about losing them as the auto industry continues to cut back and lay off workers.

"I had the day off, so I came just to check it out. You never know," said Jeremy Webster, 32, of Fenton, who does gas, sewer, water and road construction work.

Others have been without a job for months.

"I've been here to Chicago looking for work, and there's been no takers since July," said Monroe Jones, 37, of Flint, who previously worked for Flint's water department.

"It's quiet out there (in Wyoming). They don't have the crime. I'm interested in going wherever I can get a job. Now I'll just wait for someone to call me."

Sylvia Stewart, 48, came holding her 18-month-old grandson, Jaiden Stewart, and said she was willing to leave Michigan and her children and grandchildren. Stewart attended with her fiancé, Lloyd Vaughn, 41, of Flint.

"There's no jobs here. I'm tired of being poor," Sylvia said. "It won't be hard for me to go. I'm ready."

January 31, 2006

Area jobless rate jumps

But it's better than a year ago

By BILL O'BRIEN

Record-Eagle business editor

TRAVERSE CITY - The region's jobless rate jumped in December but showed marked improvement from a year ago.

The unemployment rate for the 10-county region in northwest Michigan increased to 6.9 percent last month, up from November's figure of 6.1 percent. It's down from 8.2 percent in December 2004.

"That's fairly significant," said Jim Rhein, a labor analyst from the state Department of Labor and Economic Growth. "It's not huge, but it certainly indicates some improvement in the labor market."

In the northeast Michigan area that includes Cheboygan, Crawford and Otesgo counties, the December jobless rate increased to 8.8 percent, the highest among the state's 17 major labor markets. That's up from 7.4 percent in November but down from 10.2 percent recorded in December 2004.

Statewide, the seasonally unadjusted December unemployment rate was 6.4 percent, up from 6.2 percent in November but down from the December '04 rate of 7.1 percent. That's the first yearly decline in Michigan's unemployment figures in five years.

The largest drop in jobless figures since December 2004 were recorded in the Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Saginaw and Benton Harbor labor markets, state officials said.

"Preliminary annual data for 2005 shows a decline in the unemployment rate in 15 of the state's 17 regions," said Rick Waclawek, director of the state Bureau of Labor Market Information. State labor analysts said the December unemployment increases were "typical" because of seasonal job losses in the construction field and tourism industry. There were job gains in the retail trade sector because of the holiday shopping season.

Rhein expects jobless rates in northern Michigan will increase slightly during January and February because of typical seasonal declines before the region's unemployment figures start to improve in March or April.

Only Three Granholm Proposals Dead

Of the 23 specific proposals Gov. Jennifer **GRANHOLM** made in last week's State of the State address, only three would be classified as being "Dead on Arrival" in the Legislature and at least 13 are already in the talking phase.

For as much hand-sitting as Republican lawmakers did last Wednesday when Granholm announced her initiatives, the two sides don't have irreconcilable differences on many of her initiatives. With the help of sources, *MIRS* singled out Granholm's removal of all limits on stem cell research, her insurance reforms and her call for a national cap on oil profits as not having a chance of clearing the Legislature.

Other proposals Granholm announced that Republicans may not be excited about pursuing — an increase in the minimum wage and lobbying/government ethics reforms, for example — may be taken up at some point because it's to the GOP's political advantage to do so.

A few other Granholm proposals, including the \$1 billion effort to provide health insurance to 500,000 of the state's low-income workers and a state-sponsored 401k plan, may be drawing grimaces from skeptical Republicans, but they may end up not needing legislative approval anyway.

"If your count is 23 and only three are dead on arrival, that's not too bad," said Granholm Spokeswoman Liz **BOYD**. "But it is too bad that the Legislature appears reluctant to stand up for working men and women."

Here's a breakdown of the 23 specific proposals *MIRS* found in the written text of Granholm's speech. Some of these proposals didn't make the spoken part of the speech because the governor was running up against the Michigan-Michigan State basketball game and needed to wrap it up. Granholm is still in support of those initiatives she didn't mention, however.

Legislature is already working on:

1. *"We will form a statewide partnership among all of the alternative energy research and development companies in Michigan."*

Sen. Bruce **PATTERSON** (R-Canton) said last summer (See "[*Patterson Wants Long-Term Energy Plan*](#)," 7/20/05) that as chair of the Senate Technology and Energy committee, he'd like to put Michigan on a track toward self-reliance when it comes to electricity and fuel. While he didn't mention "partnerships" in particular, he did say that he envisions a "coordinated, committed group" that works with the executive branch and the Legislature to make periodic recommendations on potential action on alternative energy.

2. *"We will dramatically increase the demand in our state for alternative sources of energy to bring those kinds of businesses to Michigan."*

Again, Patterson was on the same track back in the summer when he said he envisions benchmarks on the amount of energy Michigan can generate. His comments were used in the context that the state needs to be looking at wind, solar, bio-mass water, coal, nuclear and fuel cells to reduce the state's dependence on foreign oil and natural gas.

3. *"In Michigan, we'll help our health care industry [to] stop depending on your memory and their paper records as databanks. We are going to use technology to vastly improve the system."*

Rep. Gary **NEWELL** (R-Saranac) is working on legislation that would create a separate commission made up of health care professionals that would work with the Department of Community Health (DCH) to establish this type of paperless medical record system.

4. *"In this year, we will continue to implement current strategies targeted at encouraging personal responsibility for healthy lifestyles and outcomes for all Michigan citizens by incorporating and extending the principles supported by Michigan's Surgeon General in the Michigan Steps Up initiative."*

Sen. Tom **GEORGE** (R-Kalamazoo) told reporters he wants to see Medicaid recipients meet with a doctor to create "wellness goals" and then create a plan for when the goals should be complete. The means may initially be different but the ends are the same. Both George and Granholm want those on Medicaid to stop smoking, exercise and eat better.

5. *"... I called for the creation of a required core curriculum for all Michigan high school students ... To ensure that it can be in place by September, this Legislature needs to give that new curriculum the force of law before March."*

House Education Committee Chair Brian **PALMER** (R-Romeo) already has his own counterplan and Senate Education Committee Chair Wayne **KUIPERS** (R-Holland) is holding hearings on the subject. A statewide high school curriculum should be passed by June. March could be pushing it.

6. *"We have set aside money for emergency assistance for those struggling to pay their (heating) bills this season."*

Sitting on Granholm's desk is SB 0956, which sets aside an extra \$21.5 million to help low-income people pay their utility bills. The problem is that the bill also transfers \$116.3 million from the General Fund to the Rainy Day fund, which the administration thinks is fiscally irresponsible. This should make the governor's ultimate decision on this bill pretty awkward.

7. *"I urge the Legislature to protect our seniors by passing legislation requiring criminal background checks for those who provide elder care and employees of nursing homes in our state."*

Done. Both the Senate and House passed their own versions of this type of legislation at the urging of Attorney General Mike **COX** in December. It's likely something will get sent to the governor in the not-too-distant future.

Legislature could end up working on:

1. *"I will offer cities a major incentive to partner on significant economic development projects. Partner with the state. Partner with the private sector. And partner with other municipalities to encourage regional collaboration for major economic development and jobs projects."*

The pledge was too vague to gauge any potential legislative reaction.

2. *"We will provide access to quality, affordable health care for 550,000 people. We'll create a new insurance product in this state: The Michigan First Health Plan."*

The Senate Health Policy and Senate Community Health Appropriations Subcommittee already has scheduled a hearing for Wednesday to look at the proposal.

3. *"It has been a year since I put the new Merit Award Scholarship before this group, and it is even more critical to Michigan's future today than it was then. Tonight, Michigan's citizens, you should ask this*

Legislature: 'Why are you waiting?'"

The Senate and House could still negotiate on the issue, maybe using it as a bargaining chip to get something they really want. Republican lawmakers are reluctant to change the \$2,500 up-front scholarship with a \$4,000 completion award and they're concerned about the future costs, but they also know the governor wants this *really* bad.

4. *"We'll ask our school districts to give prompt notification to parents whenever a child's grades dip or attendance slips. And I'll ask this Legislature to write these requirements into law."*

Let's just say the Republicans aren't stampeding to the Legislative Service Bureau with their bill requests. This definitely has "local control" issues stamped all over it, but to label it "dead on arrival" would be premature.

5. *"I am urging this Legislature to require every school district in Michigan to have tough and effective anti-bullying policies."*

See above.

6. *"Let us increase the minimum wage in Michigan."*

For as much as Republicans think a minimum wage increase is a job killer, they may end up passing a mild increase to avoid a Democratic Party-sponsored ballot proposal that would not only increase the minimum wage but index it to the rate of inflation. Republicans may end up cutting a deal on this issue to take it off the 2006 ballot. The GOP doesn't want to give labor and the working poor another reason to show up to the polls in November.

7. *"I ask the Legislature to pass measures that will demand high standards of corporate responsibility from any business that seeks a state grant, a tax credit or state contract."*

Passage of something akin to what Granholm had in mind when she uttered this request is highly unlikely, but until lawmakers get a better idea of what she's talking about, it's too early to call this one dead.

8. *"I urge the Legislature to pass strong ethics legislation for politicians and candidates for office."*

Again, highly unlikely this one's going anywhere either. But like the request before it, Republicans can't call this one dead because it looks bad politically to say it. Expect any bills introduced in the Senate to be passed off to the legislative graveyard — the Senate Government Operations Committee.

9. *"Today, companies are not required to tell consumers when the security of their personal information has been compromised. That is why I am asking you to enact the strongest notification law in the country."*

Sen. Shirley **JOHNSON** (R-Troy) already has a bill out there related to informing customers of security breaches in SB 0309, but the staffer who was working on that issue has since left. Other than that, there's no reason the Republicans wouldn't want to look at the issue further.

9. *"I call on you to pass legislation that has been introduced by both Sen. (Gilda) **JACOBS** (D-Huntington Woods) and Rep. Kathy **ANGERER** (D-Dundee) that will give consumers the power to freeze their credit report in the event of identity theft."*

This is a possibility. But if the Legislature decides to go with something like this, you can be assured it won't

be Angerer's name on the public act. Republicans would never give a first-term Democrat in a vulnerable seat that kind of publicity.

10. *"The legislation I send to you this year will allow us to charge those who expose children to meth labs with statutory child abuse."*

Sen. Patty **BIRKHOLZ** (R-Saugatuck) and Rep. Rick **JONES** (R-Grand Ledge) have been all over the methamphetamine-abuse issues. If they got through a bill that put Sudafed tablets behind the counter, this one should be a slam dunk.

11. *"I strongly support new legislation that would increase penalties on businesses that refuse to give our service members their old jobs when they return from duty."*

You mean the Legislature hasn't already done this?

12. *"My administration will design and open a 401(k) plan, like the state's plan, for those workers of small companies who don't offer a pension plan."*

It's not known yet whether the Legislature needs to take action on that, but *MIRS* has learned that Sen. Nancy **CASSIS** (R-Novi) is already trying to line up state Treasurer Jay **RISING** to appear before her Senate Finance Committee to give more details on the plan (See related story).

Legislature will not take serious action on:

1. *"Tonight, I am asking you, our Legislature, to join with me in supporting this search for cures. Pass Rep. (Andy) **MEISNER**'s (D-Ferndale) bill to remove the limits on stem cell research in Michigan, and do it now."*

Fat chance. With Right to Life having a comfortable majority in each chamber, the chances of anything involving fetal stem cells making this Legislature is slim to none.

2. *"Democrats introduced a package of bills that would roll back insurance rates by 20 percent ... Pass that package — not because I asked you to, but because everyday citizens need us to."*

No way possible. If Republicans end up doing anything with insurance, it certainly isn't going to be close to what the Democrats introduced and may not be anything they can ultimately support.

3. *"Join my call for a national cap on exorbitant oil company profits."*

Yeah, right. The day Republicans sign off on *any* corporate profits cap is the day pigs really do fly over the Capitol dome.

Budget to hurt low-income people, report says

Stuart Frohm and Robert Pear of The New York Times, Midland Daily News
January 31, 2006
Midland News

The House is expected to vote Wednesday on a budget bill that could mean millions of low-income people will pay more for health care and some might lose or forgo that care.

Rep. Dave Camp, R-Midland, "feels asking individuals who receive substantial government benefits to pay as little as \$1 to \$3 in co-pays for prescription drugs in order to save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars is reasonable," his spokesman said in an e-mail message.

The message from Sage Eastman responded to a Daily News request for Camp's position and comments after the New York Times reported on the budget bill. Camp "remains supportive of the effort to rein in federal spending and get back to a balanced budget," Eastman wrote.

Camp considers the budget bill a modest first step that reduces federal spending by about 0.3 percent over five years, Eastman added.

The Senate already has approved the budget bill -- the first major effort to rein in federal benefit programs in eight years.

In his State of the Union address tonight, President Bush plans to recommend a variety of steps to help people obtain health insurance and cope with rising health costs. But the budget bill written by Congress over the last year, with support from the White House, could reduce coverage and increase the number of uninsured, the budget office said.

Overall, the bill is estimated to save \$38.8 billion in the next five years and \$99.3 billion from 2006 to 2015, with cuts in student loans, crop subsidies and many other programs, the budget office said. Medicaid and Medicare account for half of all the savings -- 27 percent and 23 percent over 10 years.

Democrats appear unlikely to defeat the budget bill, since the House approved a nearly identical version by a vote of 212-206 on Dec. 19.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa, said the bill was needed because Medicaid had been growing at an unsustainable rate.

But Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., said the budget office report confirmed that the bill would "cut access to care for some of our most vulnerable citizens."

The bill gives states sweeping new authority to charge premiums and co-payments

under Medicaid.

A report from the Congressional Budget Office says some low-income people would forgo care or drop out of Medicaid because of the higher co-payments and premiums. The report, completed Friday night, says the budget office estimated that about 45,000 Medicaid enrollees would lose coverage in fiscal year 2010 and that 65,000 would lose coverage in fiscal year 2015 because of the imposition of premiums. About 60 percent of those losing coverage would be children.

The budget office predicted that 13 million low-income people -- about a fifth of all Medicaid recipients -- would face new or higher co-payments for medical services like doctor's visits and hospital care.

It said that by 2010 about 13 million low-income people would have to pay more for prescription drugs, and that this number would rise to 20 million by 2015.

"About one-third of those affected would be children, and almost half would be individuals with income below the poverty level," the report said in addressing co-payments for prescription drugs.

Under the bill, states could end Medicaid coverage for people who failed to pay premiums for 60 days or more. Doctors and hospitals could deny services to Medicaid beneficiaries who did not make the required co-payments.

The budget office said the new co-payments would save money by reducing the use of medical services.

"About 80 percent of the savings from higher cost-sharing would be due to decreased use of services," the report said.

The official estimates take into account the fact that "savings from the reduced use of certain services could be partly offset by higher spending in other areas, such as emergency room visits."

Analysts at the Congressional Budget Office predicted that states would charge premiums to 1.3 million low-income people and cut benefits for 1.6 million people. Most of the cuts would affect dental, vision and mental health services, it said. The bill, the Deficit Reduction Act, also makes it more difficult for people to qualify for Medicaid coverage of nursing home care by transferring assets to children or other relatives for less than fair market value.

This provision would delay Medicaid eligibility for 120,000 people, or about 15 percent of the new recipients of Medicaid nursing home benefits each year, the budget office said.

Under another provision of the bill, Medicaid would deny coverage of nursing home care to any person with home equity exceeding \$500,000. States could increase the ceiling to \$750,000. About 2,000 people a year would be denied nursing home benefits because of the cap on home equity, the budget office said.

Taken together, these provisions, requiring people to use more of their own assets to pay for nursing home care, are expected to save the federal government \$6.4 billion over 10 years.

The budget office estimated that 35,000 Medicaid recipients would lose coverage because of new, more stringent requirements for them to prove U.S. citizenship. Most of those losing coverage would be illegal immigrants, but some would be citizens unable to supply the necessary documents, the report said.

Other provisions of the budget bill would establish stricter work requirements for welfare recipients and cut federal payments to the states for enforcing child support orders. The cut would save the federal government \$4.1 billion over 10 years, but child support collections would decline as a result, the budget office said.

Federal spending priorities need to be reconsidered

As the United States House of Representatives goes back into session this week, one of its first priorities will be to consider final approval of a budget reconciliation bill that includes \$40-\$50 billion in spending cuts that will limit funds for programs such as **Medicaid, child-support** enforcement and student loans.

At the same time, the U.S. Senate will consider \$50-\$70 billion in new or extended tax cuts to corporations and wealthy individuals.

Like many Americans, we question the direction our federal government is heading as it spends billions of taxpayers' dollars. Nearly everyone agrees that the federal government needs to become more efficient in providing services, but the bigger question is where should we be spending money?

The spending cuts that the House is expected to approve this week will have an impact on millions of American families. As of 2004, approximately 13,300 children in Calhoun County - more than one in three - received health care services through Medicaid. Their families undoubtedly will feel the impact of federal budget cuts that will increase premiums and co-payments for medical appointments and medications.

Likewise, the \$4.9 billion in decreased federal funding to help collect child support will mean that fewer children in poor, working-class and middle-class families alike will get the parental support they are due to help feed and clothe them.

Under the federal budget bill awaiting final approval, \$12.7 billion less in federal money will be made available for college loans over the next five years. That means people will find it more difficult to get the resources they need to continue their education and better their lives.

If, as their advocates insist, these spending cutbacks are necessary to control government spending, why are we then providing more tax breaks to large corporations and others?

This is not the time to be reducing federal revenue when the government is spending billions of dollars for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as facing an unknown total cost for the just-implemented Medicare prescription drug benefit.

The drug benefit itself represents the government's inability to spend prudently. The Department of Veterans Affairs, for example, is able to use the clout of the millions of veterans it represents to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies to get the best prices possible for prescription medications. But when Congress set up the Medicare prescription drug plan, it specifically *prohibited* the government from negotiating prices. So we, the taxpayers, will be paying top dollar for the prescription drugs purchased through the Medicare drug plan. This makes absolutely no sense and benefits no one but the pharmaceutical industry.

Congress needs to re-evaluate the way in which funding priorities are established. That seems nearly impossible when looking at the pork-barrel projects recently approved for federal dollars.

Our elected officials need to stop pandering to the lobbyists and special interests corporations that fill their campaign chests, put partisanship aside and remember that they represent real people, many of whom need government help for things like health care, child support and education.

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Special Letter
Detroit News Editorial
February 1, 2006

Shut Michigan's wasteful broadband agency

The News' call for the immediate dissolution of the Michigan Broadband Development Authority is right on the money. Unfortunately, it is the state's low-income housing fund that has taken the \$10 million hit for the authority's incompetence ("Broadband agency failures warrant closure," Jan. 19).

As for rural Michigan, there are dozens of private-sector broadband providers working to meet the needs of customers. Though the costs of deploying high-speed networks in rural areas are enormous, Michigan's broadband providers continue to invest hundreds of millions of dollars annually on new infrastructure. Nothing the state authority could do would make an impact in rural markets.

The authority wasn't a good idea and has never been part of business planning for established telecommunications companies. The money lost from Michigan's low-income housing fund vindicates legislators like Sen. Bruce Patterson, whose committee has held numerous hearings focused on the authority's abysmal performance during the past few years, and House Speaker Craig DeRoche who have the courage to attempt one of the most difficult jobs in government -- shutting down an established bureaucracy.

Let's hope they succeed so taxpayers won't be on the hook for even more wasteful spending.

Scott Stevenson
President Telecommunications Association of Michigan Lansing

Recycled phones

Are those old cell phones collecting dust in your closets? Here's a way to put them to good use, on behalf of victims of domestic violence:

Take them to one of Centennial Wireless' Lansing-area locations. They'll be refurbished and resold. The proceeds will go toward the purchase of new phones and air time.

The new phones, programmed to allow their owners to dial 911, will be distributed to women's shelters, including Lansing's EVE Inc.

The local collection points are:

- ▶ Lansing Mall.
- ▶ 2250 Lake Lansing Road, Suite A.
- ▶ 644 Migaldi Lane, Suite 700.
- ▶ 6250 S. Cedar St.

In Okemos, phones may be dropped off at the Meridian Mall or at 5100 Marsh Road.

Phones may be dropped off any time this year.

What do you think? Call John Schneider at 377-1175 or e-mail jschneid@lsj.com.